

## **A Miracle in No Man's Land**

By

Alex Jones

*Radio play and unproduced stage play - Radio 4, 15.12.97. Repeat, Radio 7, December 2006.*

*A soldier on the Western Front accused of desertion claims a vision of Christ commanded him to lay down his arms and abandon the war... Joseph Taylor, an army deserter during the First World War is ridiculed when he tells his court martial that a vision of Jesus Christ caused him to walk from the foul carnage of the battlefield. His chaplain, Captain Simpson believes him however and eagerly defends him with the result that Taylor is miraculously spared the death sentence, but as Simpson discovers, Taylor is not the innocent he seems. A play that is dramatic and moving, both about the brutalities of war and the nature of faith - contributing to the debate on pardons for deserters and the effects of prolonged battle on the health of ordinary soldiers, that is sadly still something of an issue today.*

**SYNOPSIS & SAMPLE SCENES  
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**CHARACTERS**

JOE TAYLOR

WILKIE

FRED

WALTER

BERT

BILLY

MR BIRCH

RECRUITING SERGEANT

LANDLORD

CORPORAL

DONAVAN

SIMPSON

SYKES

BENHAM

ROBBINS

MORTON

VARIOUS SOLDIERS

*There are many instances within the play for doubling up of roles. A simple costume change, which may only involve a jacket and a hat (for instance: from private to officer), can be incorporated into the style of the performance and can be done within view of the audience. The main working class voices are written in Black Country dialect, but can also be voiced in other dialects/accents to suit the production.*

*This is the original unproduced stage play script. A radio version was later broadcast on BBC Radio 4. Reviews included.*

***This play is dedicated to all 351 men who were executed by British Army firing squads during the First World War.***

**SCENE 5**

*The Front Line trench. It is nighttime and the moon casts dark shadows across No-Man's-Land. At one end of the stage there is a tangle of barbed wire, at the other, the soldiers lie behind a mound of earth (which signifies the trenches), waiting for the signal to go over the top. At the far end of the line is the CORPORAL and two unidentified SOLDIERS, then BILLY, another gap and there together lie JOE and WILKIE. Shells fall in the distance; an occasional sniper's bullet cracks the night air. A cold wind is blowing.*

WILKIE Dear Lord, bless us now in our hour of need. Be with us in this battle an' carry us through safely - Amen... Amen, Joe - say Amen.

JOE I'm not prayin', Wilkie.

WILKIE Say it, Joe - say Amen; you always say it.

JOE Give it a rest, Wilkie.

WILKIE S' unlucky!

JOE You'm the one who prays.

WILKIE I pray for you too, Joe.

JOE Doh bother.

WILKIE Say Amen, Joe.

JOE *A-bleedin'-men!*

*Pause. A few more explosions deed the darkness, booming across the horizon like the devil's timpani. BILLY calls over in a half-whisper.*

BILLY Joe, Wilkie!

JOE What's up, Billy?

*Pause.*

BILLY You all right?

JOE Yeah - you?

BILLY Yeah... I'm a bit scared.

JOE Nuthin' t' be scared of, Billy. Just keep yer 'ead down an' keep runnin'.

BILLY Yeah. (*Nervous breath*) I've...

JOE What?

BILLY Nuthin'.

JOE Just keep yer 'ead down.

*BILLY is crying. His muffled sobs can just be heard as he tried to hold it together.*

WILKIE            He's cryin'.

JOE                He shouldn't be here.

WILKIE            No, he shouldn't.

JOE                None of us should.

WILKIE            Didn't think it'd be like this.

JOE                Look at that moon - this is bleedin' stupid!

WILKIE            He's out theer, mate; Jesus is out theer.

JOE                You do talk shit!

WILKIE            In No Man's Land.

JOE                Jesus would have more soddin' sense.

WILKIE            He's tekin' care of yer, Joe - you was nearly killed last time.

JOE                *(Loud) Shut up!*

CORPORAL        *(Off) Quiet you two!*

WILKIE            You was, Joe - nearly buried.

JOE                Wilkie, look at me; I'm bleedin' well shakin'. Please shut up!

WILKIE            He's on your side, mate; you'm lucky - he likes yer.

JOE                If Jesus liked me, he'd get me out of this shit an' back t' Blighty.

WILKIE            I've got a feelin' about t'night.

JOE                Well keep it t' yerself.

WILKIE            Jesus is out theer.

JOE                So y' say.

WILKIE            Summat's gonna happen - like the angel at Mons.

JOE                I wish you'd never got religion; y' used t' be normal.

WILKIE            *(Laughs) I did, didn't I?*

BILLY             *(Calls) Joe!*

JOE                I'm here, Billy.

BILLY             I've... I've...

JOE                What?

BILLY            I've pissed meself.

*Pause.*

JOE              So?

BILLY            Well - I've pissed meself.

JOE              It doesn't matter, Billy.

BILLY            Doesn't it?

JOE              Nah, we've all pissed ourselves one time or another, haven't we Wilkie?

WILKIE          Doh worry about it, Billy.

JOE              Nature can be a right bastard sometime. I pissed meself in the Turk's 'Ead one night, remember Wilkie?

WILKIE          Y' was a bit merry that night - we had t' carry yer 'ome!

BILLY            I've never bin that drunk.

JOE              Well you've got some catchin' up t' do then.

BILLY            I've told the Major I'm under age.

JOE              What did he say?

BILLY            He's gonna look into it.

WILKIE          Mek sure he does.

JOE              You'll be all right, Billy; apparently The Lord is out theer t'night.

BILLY            Eh?

JOE              Keep yer 'ead down.

WILKIE          He is out theer.

JOE              Yeah, 'course he is! I wish I could stop shakin'. Must be the frost, eh?

*WILKIE takes his wallet and some letters from his pocket.*

WILKIE          Tek this for me, Joe.

JOE              What?

WILKIE          Letters an' stuff.

JOE              No Wilkie.

WILKIE          Tek it, pass it on t' Nancy; if anythin'... y' know?

JOE              No Wilkie, we never do this.

WILKIE Please Joe - you'm me mate, n' yer?

JOE Gie it 'ere, y' daft prat! (*Snatches letters*). What if I cop it?

WILKIE Y' won't.

JOE Oh shit, this is bloody stupid! Look at the moon; it's as bright as a summer Sunday!

WILKIE Stay close t' me, Joe.

JOE 'Course I will, mate.

WILKIE Let's not split up. I think we'll be all right if we stick t'gether.

CORPORAL *Get ready, Lads!*

JOE Shit, here we goo!

*The whistle blows and they climb the parapet into No-Man's Land. Almost immediately the sky begins to explode. Through the din of distant explosions and various shouted commands, a machine gun rattles its metallic death cry; the earth receives its lead like heavy hail. They all begin to run (on the spot), dodging bullets and shrapnel as best they can.*

WILKIE Machine-gun fire - they'm ready, the sods!

JOE Just keep runnin'!

WILKIE (*Falling*) Oh Christ!

*JOE kneels beside him.*

JOE Y' all right?

WILKIE I'm all right; bit of shrapnel in me leg, nuthin' much. Carry on - I'll meet yer at the next wire.

JOE No - cum on, I'll help yer.

WILKIE I'll be fine. Doh 'ang around 'ere, Joe it's...

*Suddenly there is a terrific explosion. The battlefield is momentarily lit with a stark phosphorous light, which fades quickly and plunges everything into temporary darkness. Clods of mud and earth are falling as the previous lighting state returns. WILKIE is decapitated. JOE is a bit stunned.*

JOE Shit... that was close... Wilkie? Wilkie? (*Crying*) Oh shit, Wilkie oh shit - that's yer head, oh shit!

*The CORPORAL approaches, BILLY close by, a look of terror on his face.*

CORPORAL Taylor! Move on - nothing you can do..! Move on, Taylor!

*JOE is frozen, in a state of shock.*

JOE (*Coming to*) Yes Corporal.

*They all approach the wire, music begins: a single note, building to a poignant, sustained chord. They reach the wire safely, but JOE is some way off from the others.*

CORPORAL      Oh, the bloody wire's not cut!

SOLDIER        Look sir, what's Taylor doin'?

*They are all crouched low at the wire, but JOE is standing upright as if in a trance, gazing before him with a strange look on his face.*

BILLY          *Joe!*

CORPROAL     Taylor, Taylor get down! Get down, Taylor!

*The music builds and the wind whips up. JOE is crying.*

JOE            *Oh Jesus!*

*The wind grows stronger and the music reaches its conclusion. Black out.*

**SCENE 6**

*The distant sound of automatic gunfire and Enfield rifle shot echoes as if in a dream. A short pause and the distant shelling begins: a low, sick rumble of bombs falling. It fades down a few decibels, but continues throughout as the lighting state reveals an officer writing at a small table, lit by a candle. It is CAPTAIN SIMPSON, the company Chaplain, composing a letter to his wife in the middle of the night*

SIMPSON *(Writing)* My dear Rose, here I am again burning the midnight oil and thinking of you and our little ones... Things are much the same as usual here... up to our eyes in mud... and blood. Old Jerry opened up with some long-range guns a few days ago; I was holding a field service at the time in the open air... they made rather a mess of things; the road was an absolute shambles - blood and gore and bits of horses mixed up with bits of... of... it was awful, my dear; but somehow with God's help I managed to... I managed to... but somehow with God's help... It was awful, my dear, but *(sighs)* but one soldiers on... one soldiers on with God's help and tries to... tries to...

*He screws up the letter.*

*(Begins again)* My dear Rose, I hope all is well with you. Here I am again burning the midnight oil and thinking of you and our little ones... I think it has been a while since I last wrote...

*But he is finding it difficult and once again he screws up the letter, troubled and frustrated. There is a knock at the door.*

*(Surprised)* Wha..?! Yes... Who is it?

DONAVON *enters.*

DONAVON Private Donavon, sir - guard duty.

SIMPSON What's the matter, Donavon? It's very late.

DONAVON 4.a.m. Sorry sir, orders sir.

SIMPSON Wha... what's it all about then?

DONAVON There's an officer t' see yer.

SIMPSON What officer?

DONAVON I don't know his name, but he's a big fat bugger.

SYKES *(Entering)* Captain Sykes, private!

DONAVON Captain Sykes, sir... oh sorry sir; didn't see yer there, like.

SYKES All right, private, off you go.

DONAVON Yes sir! *(exits).*

SYKES            Sorry to disturb you at such an ungodly hour, Chaplain, if you'll pardon the expression; but your presence is required.

SIMPSON        Wounded?

SYKES            Something quite different.

SIMPSON        There isn't an attack is there? The Company haven't been warned for the trenches, that I know of.

SYKES            No attack. We have a prisoner we want you to see.

SIMPSON        At this time of night?

SYKES            Field General Court Martial is to be convened tomorrow afternoon. He's just been brought in - deserter.

SIMPSON        I don't normally see them until...

SYKES            Bit special this one. You're to act as prisoner's friend.

SIMPSON        But that means representing him as defending counsel; I have no experience. Why me?

SYKES            As I said, Chaplain, this one is special: name's Joseph Taylor, private, ran away from the line during hostile operations, captured yesterday near Bologne. He maintains that he was ordered to lay down his arms and abandon the war.

SIMPSON        Who would give such an order?

SYKES            Well... if we were to believe him - Jesus Christ.

*Lights fade to blackout as the distant sound of shelling grows in intensity.*

**SCENE 7**

*It is a cold night and the stars twinkle brightly in the brittle-frost sky. SIMPSON's dugout has now become JOE's cell. He kneels in half-light, praying by his bed - a few bales of straw with a blanket. Nearby a Guard, PRIVATE MORTON is singing 'In The Bleak Mid Winter'. He has a very fine voice, which contrasts sharply with his dishevelled appearance. Footsteps approach from off-stage. MORTON stops singing and shoulders his rifle.*

MORTON

Who goes there?!

*SYKES and SIMPSON enter.*

SYKES

It's only me, soldier - Captain Sykes and Captain Simpson.

MORTON

Chaplain! Good t' see yer, sir. Practisin' me Carols I was sir, for the Christmas service.

SIMPSON

So I see. It sounded very fine.

MORTON

Sing with a bit of a choir, I do. We had some nice voices back home in our chapel; but some of these lads ain't too bad. One of 'em plays the accordion.

SIMPSON

Perhaps I'll come to your next rehearsal.

MORTON

You'd be very welcome. I like Christmas! Reckon it's gonna snow soon, be a white 'un, eh?

SIMPSON

Most likely.

SYKES

How's the prisoner, soldier?

MORTON

Still prayin', sir; hasn't stopped! He's a strange 'un; don't seem the least bit flustered. Grinnin' like a blinkin' monkey, he is.

SYKES

Right, well I'll leave you with him, Chaplain. Get what facts you can. Tomorrow we'll just be formally charging him. But I'm afraid this one will most definitely be shot.

SIMPSON

How can you say that before you've even heard the evidence?

SYKES

With respect, Chaplain - what evidence? The ravings of a desperate man? You'll probably be officiating his execution.

SIMPSON

Wonderful, Sykes! Who exactly do I thank for such a distressing task?

SYKES

The prisoner, Chaplain, he chose you... If there's any trouble, call out; the guard will be outside. I'll see you tomorrow - I'm prosecuting. (*Exits*).

MORTON

You'll be all right, Chaplain - he's not dangerous.

SIMPSON

He's kept in here? It's just an abandoned outhouse.

MORTON            Well he doesn't seem to mind. Truth is they just want to get it over with as quickly as possible - there's a rumour there's a big push on the way.

*MORTON walks into the shadows and lights a cigarette as SIMPSON walks into the space that is JOE's cell. JOE is praying.*

JOE                (*Almost a whisper*) I know that you will be with me in my ordeal; give me strength to speak your message. And Christ our Lord let all your mercies be realised here on earth...

*SIMPSON coughs to make his presence known.*

                         The glory be yours now an' always - Amen.

*JOE turns to face SIMPSON and smiles.*

SIMPSON         Private Taylor, isn't it?

JOE                (*Coming to attention*) Joseph Taylor.

SIMPSON         Sit down, please. I'm, I'm supposed to represent you.

JOE                I asked for yer, hope y' don't mind.

SIMPSON         No... but to be completely honest, I'm afraid I really have no experience at this sort of thing.

JOE                Doh worry, Chaplain; I'll be goin' West, I know that.

SIMPSON         You can't say that...

JOE                It's a certainty an' it doh matter. There's nuthin' y' can do about it.

SIMPSON         I don't understand... then why..?

JOE                What's important, Chaplain is that the truth is known.

SIMPSON         What truth?

JOE                We've got to end this war, Chaplain. It's gorra stop now before it swallows up the whole world. We're facin' a precipice; gapin' into the chasm of hell - there's a nightmare out there waitin' t' possess us all: this conflict is the devil's work...

SIMPSON         Wait - you're not making sense, man. I need some facts. Now tell me simply and quietly how you came to be here? Why did you desert?

JOE                Haven't *they* told yer?

SIMPSON         *You* tell me.

JOE                They think I'm mad, but I'm not; I'm the sanest man 'ere.

SIMPSON         I want to help you if I can. What happened?

JOE I've fought battles, Chaplain: Verdun, I was there; one of Kitchener's earliest, I am. Somme Spring offensive - fust day! Got a medal for it. I've never really approved of this war, but I'm no coward; blood an' killin' is all I've ever known since volunteerin'. An' this one was no different: the whistle blew so climbed the parapet an' ran t' command like a dog... As we advanced I saw a few of me mates cop it; one of 'em, Wilkie; Charles Wilkinson, lovely lad he was, Chaplain, a religious man, always prayin' he was... anyway his head was blown off - it rolled along the ground like a bleedin' football... (*choked*) *sorry*.

SIMPSON Take your time.

JOE Thank you, sir... (*Recovers*) I've sin so much pain an' sufferin' you'd think it wouldn't hurt anymore, but it does: it's a waste, sir, a stupid bloody waste.

SIMPSON No sacrifice is a waste, Joseph.

JOE Yes it is, sir, it is now: summat's happened out there; everythin's changed now - we're standin' on a precipice.

SIMPSON What happened?

JOE It was the usual bloody cock-up: no wires cut, no back-up mortars; I ran t' me death, or so I thought. I'd hit the second wire an' eventually found a hole big enough t' crawl through, when a bloody big Howitzer planted one a few yards in front of me face.

SIMPSON But...

JOE I should've bin killed, I know. I felt a great heat on me face; a flash of phosphor an' fire that should've skinned me eyes. Chunks of shrapnel and clay rained all around me... an' I wasn't touched. I was still standin' at the wire when the smoke began to clear. All of a sudden a flare went up... an' there he was; standin' very still an' calm I ike, starin' right at me.

SIMPSON Who?

JOE Christ, Jesus Christ... it was very strange. It was as if the clock that turns the world had stuck. Everythin' had suddenly gone quiet - complete silence: no guns, no whizz-bangs, nuthin'. Just me an' him starin' at each other.

SIMPSON You can't expect me to believe this, Taylor.

JOE I'm deadly serious, Chaplain. It was him - our Saviour.

*Lights fade to blackout.*

## A MIRACLE IN NO MAN'S LAND

### REVIEWS

#### **Radio 4, 15.12.97. Repeat, Radio 7, December 06.**

*Radio Times* - Radio Choice. Accused of desertion on the Western Front in 1917. Joseph Taylor faces a mandatory death sentence. But at his court martial, he claims he was commanded to lay down his arms after seeing a vision of Jesus Christ in no-man's land. The drama's author, Alex Jones stars as the accused man.

*Daily Mail* - Radio Choice. Loosely speaking, Alex Jones's *A Miracle In No Man's Land* is a Christmas play, because it is set on the Western Front in December 1917 when carols softened the rattle of the machine guns. Jones himself plays the army volunteer accused of desertion after claiming that he met Christ on the battlefield and was commanded by him to lay down his arms - a super performance in a super play, I don't believe Sue Wilson's direction has been equalled in radio drama during 1997. *Peter Davalle*.

*The Express* - Radio choice. Alex Jones's play about a deserter who claims to have seen Christ on the First World War battlefield starts slowly, but builds to a compulsive drama about faith and killing from a soldier's point of view.

*The Stage* - Radio Choice. The nature of theological belief versus the acrid stench of war was powerfully examined in *A Miracle In No Man's Land* for Radio 4. Alex Jones co-starred with Christopher Scott.

*The Guardian* - Radio Choice. It's hard to understand Radio 4's decision to abandon 90 minute dramas. What, after next spring, will the network do with splendid productions like Alex Jones's *A Miracle In No Man's Land*? The author plays the war-weary First World War private who tells a disbelieving court martial he deserted because Christ appeared on the battlefield bidding him stop the war. The text brilliantly captures the mood of the period and the performances are first-rate. *Harold Jackson*.

*Daily Telegraph* - Radio Choice. Just before Christmas on the Western Front in 1917, Captain Simpson (Christopher Scott) is ordered to defend Joseph Taylor (Alex Jones) a Black Country soldier who says he's had a vision of Christ bidding him to lay down his arms. The court martial doesn't believe him. But a miracle has happened. *Gillian Reynolds*.

*Daily Mail Weekend* - Radio Choice. When a World War 1 deserter claims divine guidance, is it *A Miracle In No Man's Land*? Alex Jones's *Monday Play* contributes to the debate on pardons for deserters. \* *Recommended*. L'O'C.

*The Observer* - Radio choice. In *The Monday Play - A Miracle In No Man's Land*, Joseph Taylor, an army deserter during the First World War, is ridiculed when he tells his court martial that a vision of Jesus Christ caused him to walk away from the foul carnage of the battlefield. His chaplain, Captain Simpson (Christopher Scott) believes him however and eagerly defends him with the result that Taylor is 'miraculously' spared the death sentence, but Simpson eventually discovers, Taylor (Alex Jones, who also wrote the play), is not the innocent he seems. *Stephanie Billen*.

*A sample call from BBC Daily Log* - Re. *A Miracle In No Man's Land*. "Absolutely superb. The best thing I've heard in years." *Mr Penton, Poole*.